

ETHIOPIA AND ETHNIC POLITICS: THE CASE OF OROMO NATIONALISM

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The Oromo national movement has been a major potential threat to successive Ethiopian regimes and Ethiopian opposition political groups for three decades because of two important reasons. First, the Oromos are more than half of the Ethiopian population (50 million) and the major economic resources of Ethiopia are located in their territories.¹ Second, the Oromos are aware of their second-class status in Ethiopia and that they are denied equal access to economic and political opportunities with the Amharas and the Tigrayans. Hence, the Oromo national movement, particularly the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), has a radical political agenda that aims at fundamentally changing the relationship between the Oromos and the Ethiopians.

The majority of Oromos have refused to join Ethiopian political organizations and have opted for an independent Oromo organization. As a result, it is becoming practically impossible for Ethiopian political organizations to influence Oromo political opinions and agendas. Therefore, the Oromo national movement is seen as a dangerous political trend by those Ethiopians who are in power and by those who oppose them. This national movement, a struggle for national or ethnic self-determination, is little known to the world. It was only in May 1991, when the Ethiopian military regime collapsed, that the media began briefly to mention the existence of Oromos and their struggle for national self-determination under the leadership of OLF. This paper explores the historical evolution of the Oromo national movement. It also examines the new contradiction between the OLF and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (including its affiliated organizations) that replaced the Ethiopian military regime.



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Brief Historical Introduction

The creation and maintenance of Ethiopia as a colonial empire in the last decades of the nineteenth century established the fundamental conflict between the Oromos and the Ethiopians. By allying with European imperialism and colonizing the Oromo, the Ethiopian ruling class created the Ethiopian empire and brought Oromo economic and human resources under control.² During their colonization, various Oromo groups and their leaders conducted locally-based struggles to resist Ethiopian colonialism or to get rid of alien rule and restore their ways of life.³ The Ethiopian Empire was further maintained by the alliance of the Ethiopian state with successive hegemonic powers—Great Britain, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.⁴ These powers were involved mainly because of geopolitical interests.

The shift in alliance from the West to the East was necessitated by the crisis Ethiopia experienced in the 1970s. However, this shift of alliance did not change the nature of Ethiopian colonialism, except for the reorganization of the Ethiopian state. The Haile Selassie regime was replaced by that of Colonel Mengistu. Colonel Mengistu was a brutal dictator who imposed on the Oromos new colonial institutions, such as military-controlled mass associations and settlement villages, known for their massive human rights abuses. Rather than solving the longstanding contradictions between the Oromos and the Ethiopians, the Mengistu regime intensified them. With military and technical assistance it received from the East and financial support from the West, it embarked not only on controlling the Oromos, their labor and economic resources, but also escalated the attack on Oromo culture, language and identity to destroy their peoplehood and nationalism.

The Mengistu regime collapsed in May 1991 due to two important factors. Because of post-cold war international politics, it could not receive the financial, military and technical assistance from both East and West that were essential in maintaining the Ethiopian empire. The most important factor for the demise of the regime was the armed and political struggles conducted by the Oromo, Eritrean and Tigray liberation movements.⁵ With the collapse of the Mengistu regime and the disintegration of the army, Eritrea was liberated and Amhara political hegemony has been replaced by Tigrayan political hegemony in Ethiopia. But the Oromos did not achieve their national self-

determination. The replacement of Amhara political hegemony by that of Tigray has shifted the major conflict between the Amharas and the Oromos to the conflict between the latter and the Tigrayans.

Two Phases of the Oromo National Struggle

There have been two successive phases in the Oromo national movement. The first phase indicated the rise of Oromo nationalism. The second phase manifested a clear political agenda of Oromo nationalism and the birth of the OLF. In the first phase, there were two types of struggle. The first type was started by urban-based Oromo intellectuals, army officers, soldiers, students and merchants who could not tolerate colonial mistreatment and discrimination due to national origin. In the 1960s, these groups created a social movement known as the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association to address Oromo social issues. The second type was the Bale Oromo farmer movement that gradually developed into a loosely-organized armed struggle during the same period. Although the second phase of the struggle has been the continuation of the first, it is also a radical departure from it. During this phase, the revolutionary and politically-conscious Oromo intellectuals created the OLF in order to provide central leadership for the Oromo national movement. The OLF has mapped out two types of important and interrelated political objectives. These objectives are the liberation of Oromia (the Oromo nation) from alien rule and the radical reorganization of the Oromo nation, based on democratic principles and new productive relations.

The Rise of Oromo Nationalism, 1960s-1970s

The 1960s was the decade of decolonization in Africa. The Oromos, the Eritreans and the Ogaden-Somalis also began their liberation struggles in that decade, although they did not get the same attention and support as some other African nationalists. Almost all the new governments of decolonized African countries have opposed the liberation movements of the Oromos, Eritreans and Ogaden-

Somalis because of their direct colonization by Ethiopians, rather than Europeans. The Organization of African Unity, formed by the membership of the decolonized African countries, and Ethiopia stood together against the aspirations of such African peoples in the name of "territorial sovereignty" of countries.

In the early 1960s, the Oromo national movement manifested itself in the formation of the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association and the emergence of the Oromo farmer armed struggle in Bale. The emergence of the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association and the Bale Oromo armed struggle in the same decade marked the beginning of an Oromo redefinition of relationship with the Ethiopian colonialists. After their colonization, the Oromo leaders of various regions came together, for the first time, to create a centrally-led movement.

The Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association

Since the Ethiopian government paid little attention to the welfare of the Oromo people, those few Oromo individuals who joined colonial institutions (such as schools, the army and government administration) and Oromo merchants began to think about ways to improve the Oromo living standard. Despite their individual achievements, such Oromos also had inferior status to Ethiopians due to their ethnic identity. By joining colonial institutions, these individuals learned more about the oppression of the Oromo people and began to develop ethnic nationalism. Referring to this condition, Paul Baxter argues that "As more Oromos became civil servants, army officers and NCD's and more Oromo schoolboys became undergraduates, and as more Oromo members of parliament managed to get elected, the various Oromo groups found that, in addition to humiliating experiences, they shared a common language and similar values. The new pan-Oromo consciousness was largely generated by the army, the university and parliament itself."⁶

These Oromo individuals who were in the army, the university and parliament were brought together in urban areas by the same colonial institutions that discriminated against them and also used them as agents. Both individual experiences and the exploitation and oppression of their people made them politically aware. As a result,

they started to organize themselves to deal with the Oromo question. Since these Oromo individuals did not expect the colonial government to contribute to the welfare of their people, they organized self-help associations. They also did this because there was no freedom for forming a political organization. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Ethiopian government allowed only the formation of local self-help associations.

The year 1963 was a turning point in Oromo history because a core of Oromo nationalists, such as Haile-Mariam Gamada, a lawyer, and Alemu Qixxeesa, a retired colonel, merged their small self-help associations and formed the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association.⁷ The three self-help associations that initially merged to form this association were the Meta-Robbi, Jibat-Macha and the Tuullama-Shawa Self-Help Associations. The merger of small self-help associations to form the Macha-Tuullama Association marked the public rise of Oromo nationalism. The first three main objectives of the association were the establishment of schools and health clinics and the construction of roads wherever they were needed in the Oromo regions.⁸ The other objectives included building churches and mosques for the Christian and Muslim believers who did not have them. The first set of objectives was aimed at improving the welfare of the Oromo nation; the second set was aimed implicitly at mobilizing the Oromo nation for a common goal by undermining the colonial policy of divide and rule in the bases of religion and region.

Although in its constitution the association mentioned that it would assist its members during accident, illness, death and other serious problems, its main emphasis was on Oromo national development. The association was open to all interested. The Ethiopians opposed the association from its beginning, but individuals from other colonized nations joined it. With the increased popularity of the association, Oromo scholars, university and high school students, merchants, high-ranking military and civil officials, soldiers and farmers continuously joined the Macha-Tuullama Association.

Within three years, its registered membership reached over two million.⁹ Under the guidance of a core of nationalist leaders, such as Haile-Mariam Gamada, General Taddasa Biru and Captain Mamo Mezemir, the nature and direction of the association became clearer. And its membership, its popularity and the expansion of its branches

in rural and regional areas created a serious concern on the part of the Ethiopian government and its functionaries. The association established numerous branch offices in eight administrative regions.¹⁰ General Taddasa Biru, a devoted Orthodox Christian who was never suspected of being an Oromo, joined this association and emerged as its main leader. He began to take courageous political actions to expose certain secret government policies. Once, before he joined the association, there was a meeting in which Prime Minister Aklilu Habte Wolde, Akal Wolde Habte Wolde, Taddasa Biru, Kifle Yirgatu and other top government officials were present to plan how to limit the flow of Oromos to schools and the army, in order to secure the future Ethiopia for sons and daughters of the Amharas. They argued that if Oromos continuously join the institutions without any restrictions, they would endanger the Ethiopian government.¹¹ General Taddasa Biru left the meeting without commenting and, later, secretly expressed how he was wrong in considering himself an Ethiopian. From that time onward, the general committed himself to the emancipation of the Oromo nation. When he later joined this association, he did so with much political spirit. The Ethiopian government started to perceive the potential danger of the association at this time. As we shall see shortly, the Ethiopian government also feared that the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association, in collaboration with the Bale Oromo armed struggle, would cause a real threat.

Because of the potential danger of this association, the government began to provoke it, in order to have a pretext to ban it. When some of the leaders of the association traveled from place to place to describe the objectives of the association, local and regional government functionaries created obstacles.¹² Further, the government became suspicious and began to suppress the organization's activities. When the leaders attended meetings at Kachisi, Jeldu, Kalacha, Bishoftu, Bako and Dheera, local governments attempted to disperse the meetings.¹³ The Ethiopian government did not like to see all Oromos—Muslims and Christians, soldiers and civilians, urban dwellers and farmers—come together to discuss ways of improving their conditions through education and development.

The Ethiopian government began continually harassing the members and leaders of the association. It did not tolerate this peaceful attempt

"to restore the inalienable rights of the Oromo people."¹⁴ The government accused the leaders of being conspirators aiming to overthrow the government. It also used a bomb explosion in a cinema house as a pretext to imprison General Taddasa Biru, and hang the organization's leading figures, including Captain Mamo Mezemir. In 1967, the government finally dissolved the association. General Taddasa Biru was released from prison in 1974 and murdered by the military government in 1975.¹⁵ As A.P. Wood aptly comments, referring to the Tuullama Self-Help Association: "Although nominally a self-help association, it began to articulate the dissatisfaction of the Oromo with the government, and particularly with their position in society. This position, together with its organizing along ethnic lines, caused much government concern and . . . the Association was banned."¹⁶

Although the Machu-Tuullama Self-Help Association was primarily engaged in a peaceful struggle, there is evidence that some of its more radical leading figures, among them Captain Mamo Mezemir, were preparing the Oromos for conscious political action, and had begun to establish a clandestine connection with the Bale Oromo armed struggle. In his letter of September 10, 1965, Mamo Mezemir, the secretary of the Association, stated that:

The Macha and Tuullama democratic movement, which was created to raise the consciousness of the Oromo people, is in the present concrete situation working day and night to put in hand coordination activities that are within our reach. In fact, the militant members are working now on the means of organizing a nationwide people's movement which is based on realizing the aspiration of the Oromo people as a whole. Please, keep up your heroic armed struggle, defending every inch of the Oromo Nation to the last drop of blood. The decisive war or resistance you are conducting in Bale will, despite the manoeuvre of imperialism . . . and local reaction, be victorious. We shall continue doing everything we can to keep in touch with you.¹⁷

There were many Oromo individuals, like Haji Adam Sado from Bale, who were accused and imprisoned by the Ethiopian government for supporting the macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association and establishing connection between the Association and the Bale Oromo farmer movement.¹⁸ Commenting on the general impact of the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association, Hassen argues that it was "a landmark in the history of the Oromo people since colonization,

leading as it did to a countrywide political awakening."¹⁹ The Bale Oromo armed struggle was another side of the Oromo national struggle of the 1960s.

The Bale Oromo Farmer Movement

Between 1963 and 1970, the Bale Oromo farmers had transformed their spontaneous and scattered resistance to Ethiopian colonialism to loosely-organized guerilla struggle. Understanding the importance of alliance and firearms, they coordinated their struggle against colonialism with the Ogaden-Somalis and obtained firearms from the Somali government. The Ethiopians and their supporters depicted this anti-colonial Oromo farmer movement as an extension of the Somali expansionist policy; or that, supposedly "without political objectives,"²⁰ its connection with the Macha Tuullama Self-Help Association, the speeches of its leaders, its political targets (colonial settlers, government officials and their supporters) and its articulated causes clearly showed how it was created as an integral part of the Oromo national struggle.²¹

The fire of the revolt that was lit at El Mare and Wabe in 1963 by the Ogaden-Somali and Oromo peoples respectively gradually reached Dhibiso, Beltu, Rayitu, Gololcha and Dalo.²² The revolt that began in Bale was also felt in Sidamo, particularly in Borana. The Oromos and the Ogaden-Somalis were tired of their exploitation, oppression and dehumanization under the Ethiopian colonial system and resorted to armed struggle. Religious oppression, increased produce extraction through taxation and bribes, land expropriation and arbitrary imprisonment and continuous humiliation under Ethiopian rule created a political base on which the two peoples allied against their common enemies, the Ethiopian colonial settlers. This alliance helped in undermining the inter-clan and inter-ethnic conflicts that "government officials usually revived and influenced."²³ For instance, although the government resettlement policy in Borana initially created conflicts among the Oromos and then between the Oromos and the Somalis, it gradually contributed to the expansion of the revolt in this region.²⁴ The peoples in the area turned their anger against the colonial settlers. G. Tareke argues that "the government by its misguided and often

contradictory policies and inefficient administration had greatly contributed to the rapid expansion of the political crisis with which it was faced.²⁵

"With the spread of the revolt in Bale and Borana, some active leaders began to go to Somalia for arms. Then, gradually Waaqo Guutu and his lieutenant, Waaqo Lugo, managed to form an amorphous organization that served as a nucleus for the disparate parties then operating in Delo."²⁶ Due to the nature of the farmer organization, and its lack of technical and administrative skills, although guerilla tactics were used and Waaqo Guutu was seen as the leader, there was no centralized politico-military command. Despite these problems, the farmer guerrillas, under their respective leaders, fought very courageously and effectively.²⁷ Within the first three years, they brought almost three-fifths of Bale (a part of southeastern Oromo) under their influence and control.²⁸ According to Tareke, "Government effectiveness was largely confined to the towns in the highland, but even these including Goba, were not at all safely shielded from sporadic attacks. The capital was attacked twice by rebel forces."²⁹ One Ethiopian officer who appears fascinated by the performance of the rebels commented that "their aim, cruelty and meticulous performance indeed exemplifies the communist spirit and action which the rebels seem to have embraced like a religion."³⁰

For the Ethiopians and their supporters, because the Oromos were assisted by the Somali government and allied with the Ogaden-Somalis, the revolt was seen as the product of foreign influence. For instance, Ketsala argues that "foreign influence provided the stimulus to the awakening of political consciousness, without which there would have been no rebellion in Bale."³¹ This attempt at explanation ignores the very real internal causes of the revolt and locates the causes, instead, in external and secondary processes; it suggests that the colonized peoples in the Ethiopian Empire were not capable of revolt on their own. As Tareke writes: "This farmer movement's survival for six years against a superior enemy under many impossible odds is an achievement which can only be explained by the revolt's organization capabilities and popular support. The peasants shared common grievances arising from the social system. This was the basis for their rising and unity."³²

The Bale and Borana Oromos had shaken the Ethiopian colonial foundation in their region. Because the movement had almost expelled the colonial settlers from Borana, Dalo, Genale, Wabe, and El Kere, the colonial government put the areas under martial rule in 1969. Between 1968 and 1969, the condition of the rebels was changing for three reasons.³³ With the change in government through the military coup in Somalia, material support for the rebels decreased. In the same period, the British government began to intervene in the conflict on the side of the Ethiopian government by building a bridge over the River Ganale so that government soldiers would have access to the guerilla bases there. Similarly, American Air Force experts improved the Ethiopian capacity to fight guerrillas with airborne troops, helicopter, and low-level bombing.³⁴ Because of these developments, the rebels agreed to a negotiated settlement with the government, and the conflict came to a formal end in 1970. But sheer superiority of armed force had temporarily won the battle, without resolving any of the existing contradictions. The revolt left in the minds of the Oromos, however, the sense that, if they were effectively organized in their fight against Ethiopian colonialism, they would one day regain for themselves their freedom.

Oromo Cultural Revival

Since the colonialization, the Oromo culture and language have been despised by Ethiopians and given inferior status. Such colonial actions were intended to prevent the Oromos from developing their peoplehood and nationalism. The process of Ethiopianization has had some limited success in producing a few elements of educated Oromos whose culture and tradition were stripped away.³⁵ Some members of the Oromo intermediate class have tried to be Ethiopians/Amharas by accepting their language and culture; some others have tried to be Adares or Somalis. Since maintaining an Oromo identity blocks self-improvement, members of the Oromo intermediate class sacrificed their peoplehood and allowed themselves to be assimilated. According to Frantz Fanon, "Every colonized people . . . every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the

language of the civilizing [colonizing] nation; that is the culture of the mother country."³⁶

But for the Oromo masses, assimilation for privilege was limited since their links to the Amharas and the others were limited. With the rise of Oromo nationalism, the need to be assimilated into the dominant culture was challenged. As it was shameful to speak Oromiffa (the Oromo language) in urban areas before, it became later shameful for the Oromos to speak in foreign languages to one another. As the Oromo people flowed from rural areas into cities, the condition of urban areas began to change. While a few were successful and became petty traders, most became laborers, semi-laborers and unemployed. These groups and students brought the Oromo language and culture to urban areas where the colonialists were concentrated. For instance, the Arffan Qallo musical group was created in this process in the city of Dire Dawa.³⁷ Despite the colonial government's attempts to disrupt the Arffan Qallo musical group,³⁸ it grew and gained fame initially in Hararghe, and then in the entire Oromia. The group also performed some dramas that the colonial government completely opposed.³⁹ In the name of censorship, the government created serious problems for the group. Because of its fame, the group was frequently invited to Finfine (Addis Ababa) during meetings of the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association.⁴⁰ Later, the government banned the group. Although suppressed by the colonial government, the group opened a new chapter in the Oromo cultural revival. The suppression of the Macha-Tuullama Self-Help Association and the Arffan Qallo musical group, and the defeat of the Bale Oromo struggle in the late-1960s, forced Oromo nationalism to go underground.

During the breakdown of Haile Selassie's regime in the early 1970s, an Oromo cultural committee emerged in Finfine (Addis Ababa). Members of this committee came from different professional backgrounds: teachers, civil servants, workers, soldiers, students and religious leaders. The main objectives of the committee were to restore the Oromo language and culture by producing an Oromo dictionary, newspaper and literature, and establishing various subcultural groups in different parts of Oromia.⁴¹ In 1974, encouraged by the change of government, the committee petitioned the new government to permit the use of the adapted Roman characters for

writing of Oromiffa. Rejecting the petition, the junta said that "Ethiopic script is the repository of Ethiopian Christian civilization and the use of a foreign script in its place will open our unique culture and civilization to undesirable foreign values, such as communism."⁴² The committee was forced to use Ethiopic script in producing an Oromo dictionary and a weekly newspaper called *Bariisa*, in the early 1970s. The military government confiscated this newspaper and imprisoned most Oromos who had worked in its office, in 1980, on the charge that they were sympathizers of the Oromo Liberation Front.⁴³

With the initiation of the cultural committee, many cultural and musical groups were created in many parts of Oromia. With the encouragement of the committee and the support of other Oromos, six cultural and musical groups from Bale, Arssi, Hararghe, Shawa, Illu Babor and Wallaga came together in Addis Ababa and gave a variety of Oromo cultural performances and dramas, in the late 1970s. It was the first time since their colonization that the Oromos had come together to perform and celebrate in this way. Later, regretting its permission for the Oromos to express their cultural heritage, the junta imprisoned, tortured or murdered most of the participants, both organizers and performers.⁴⁴

The continuous failure of scattered and spontaneous efforts and the brutal suppression of cultural and social movements have left the Oromos with two options: either the acceptance of Ethiopian colonial domination as an unchallengeable phenomenon, or a revolt under a centralized and politically matured revolutionary organization that would enable them to engage into protracted political and armed struggle. In effect, colonization and exclusion from all political and social institutions, dehumanization and discrimination, exploitation of resources, distortion of history, and deprivation of language and freedom left the Oromos with only the option of revolt through creating a nationwide coordinated political organization. This condition resulted in the creation of the OLF in the early 1970s.

The Birth and Growth of the OLF

The OLF was officially created in 1974 when it declared itself through its first program. In Finfine (Addis Ababa), some clandestine Oromo study circles developed into two political groups in that year and began to produce and distribute political pamphlets agitating for revolution and decolonization of Oromia. These groups were known as *Bakalcha Oromo* and *Oromia*. The *Bakalcha* political group established itself as the central organ of the OLF. Some members of the *Oromia* political group also joined the OLF. In the early 1970s there were serious political and economic crises in the Ethiopian Empire, and these developments facilitated some changes in the activities of underground political movements. During the same period, some Oromo political activists who had been trained as guerilla fighters in the Middle East began to return to Oromia in order to create an Oromo liberation army.

The Somali government, however, sabotaging the Oromo struggle, captured and imprisoned those returning through its territory.⁴⁵ Others, though, managed to return to Oromia by another route and established the embryo of an Oromo liberation army that began protracted armed struggle in the early 1970's, in the Charchar Highlands in eastern Oromia. The relation between the main Oromo political nucleus group, the *Bakalcha* group, and the guerilla unit had always been kept alive through a secret connection; and the two groups secretly debated many times in Finfine and developed the first OLF program in 1974; it was amended in 1976.⁴⁶ As summarized in the program, the discussion concentrated on defining the political objectives of the Oromo liberation movement, the enemies of the Oromo Revolution and possible friends, and the future direction of Oromia.⁴⁷ The main political objective is "the realization of national self-determination for the Oromo people and their liberation from oppression and exploitation in all their forms. This can only be realized through successful consummation of the new democratic revolution . . . and the establishment of the people's democratic republic of Oromia."⁴⁸

In its program, the OLF states that Oromia will be radically reorganized to overcome poverty, backwardness and illiteracy; and that the democratically elected revolutionary government will play

central roles in rebuilding agriculture by providing modern agro-technology and organizational skills for household farms, cooperatives and state farms. Generally speaking, the democratically elected revolutionary government will have a dominant role in rebuilding a revolutionary Oromia in fields of education, agriculture, industry, etc. At this historical period, the question of radically reorganizing agriculture and nationalization of the main means of production are raising several debates in those countries that one time took the revolutionary path of development. Oromia can learn much from these failures and successes before it embarks on implementing its programs.

The OLF program considers the working class—the workers and farmers—the backbone of the Oromo revolution. Small merchants, revolutionary intellectuals, teachers, and other patriotic elements are seen as supporters of the revolution. The program also states that the ideology of the Oromo democratic revolution is that of the working class. Rather than limiting itself to such an ideological position, which is sometimes vague, the OLF needs to broaden its perspectives. Indeed, in practice, the OLF goes beyond what it mentions in its program by enabling the farmers in its liberated areas to organize and defend themselves on the basis of their own values and traditions—without imposing the will of its cadres.⁴⁹ OLF cadres provide only educational, military and technical services for its liberated farmers.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as practices in OLF-related organizations in Europe and North America indicate, the relations between the OLF and these organizations and among members of the associations are based on democratic principles.

From its inception, the OLF has faced brutal opposition from the Ethiopians and the Somali expansionists.⁵¹ It also faced a serious internal problem. Therefore, we can say that the OLF was born, survived and grew between a pincers movement. Of course, in the process, it lost some leaders, fighters, supporters and sympathizers. The Somali government recruited some Oromo refugees and attempted to use them to divide the Oromo nation on the bases of region and religion. It created the "Somali Abo" Liberation Front (SALF) in 1976, as a branch of the Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF) to use it in incorporating the eastern and southern Oromos.⁵² The creation of the name "Somali Abo" for the Oromos by the Somali

government indicated the intention of Somalia to "Somalize" the Oromos. In order to control the SALF, the Somali government subordinated recruited Oromos to the Somali leaders who dominated the central committee, although the majority of fighters were Oromos from Bale and Sidamo.⁵³ Although there were Oromos who accepted the Somalia political agenda, in 1980 "there was a large defection of the majority of the 33-man SALF central committee to the OLF."⁵⁴ From this time, the SALF became a shadow organization. Realizing its mistakes or for tactical reasons, the Somalia government changed its policy toward the question of Oromia and allowed the OLF to open its office in Mogadishu in January 1980. Later, however, it expelled the OLF people from Somalia.

It was not easy to transform qualitatively spontaneous and scattered protests into a common politically conscious and centrally organized armed struggle. Those individuals who joined the struggle emotionally were not always ready for continuous and risky engagement. Because of regional and religious divisions among the Oromo people, which a century of colonialism had intensified, and because of other differences in social and political backgrounds of participants, it was not easy to build a centralized national political institution. Oromo revolutionaries were exposed to many reactionary forces. A clique that did not differentiate between individual and institutional power secretly assassinated Baro Tumisa, Badho Daccassa and others in 1978, the year they reorganized the Oromo liberation army and its political structure to consolidate the OLF.⁵⁵ This condition created confusion and disruption in the Oromo Liberation Front.

Ethiopia continuously attacked the OLF to destroy its infancy. According to Melbaa, in 1978, "The capture of a guerilla detachment north of Ambo (near Addis Ababa) . . . caused consternation in government circles and led to the mass arrest and imprisonment of innocent Oromo peasant leaders, students, workers and intellectuals."⁵⁶ The Ethiopians have always been seriously concerned about the Oromo struggle. Baxter argues that "the crucial dependence of Ethiopia on the Oromo inclines the central, and Amhara . . . government to strike out at any manifestation of Oromo consciousness."⁵⁷ The early attacks from all sides on the OLF and on its supporters and sympathizers slowed its development. Hence, initially, its survival was seen as a qualitative leap in Oromo history.

The survival of the OLF has been seen by some Oromos as "psychological liberation."⁵⁸ Despite the difficult situations, the OLF survived and grew. In the 1970s, its operational zone was limited to eastern Oromia. But in the 1980s, it began to operate in western Oromia. In 1985, a source wrote, its "operational area has increased over the 9 years. From Hararghe . . . OLF has spread southwards to Bale on the border with Kenya, and westwards to Wallaga."⁵⁹

We can address some questions about the liberated areas, particularly in the western part of Oromia.⁶⁰ The OLF mainly depended on its own resources and the local population for food, intelligence and supplies.⁶¹ It built its military resources through a series of surprise attacks on the colonial forces, and the capturing of their weapons and other materials. Grilz, an Italian journalist, who accompanied one such attack, saw "a raid in Debek's town, where the rebels seized 21 rifles and assault rifles, two sub-machine guns, one pistol . . . overwhelming the local force of militiamen and party members."⁶² In eastern Oromia where the OLF did not have a direct external access due to Somalia's opposition, the OLF depended totally on arms it captured from the colonialists. Regarding this, one OLF leader said, "Our problem there is that we have to depend entirely on what we can capture from the enemy, and it's impossible to programme our growth as we do in the west."⁶³

The settlement and villagization programs and political repressions forced the Oromos to leave their home *en masse* and to seek refuge in the liberated areas and in the Sudan. It was the responsibility of the Oromo Relief Association (ORA) to take care of these refugees from its meager resources. There are clinics and schools in many parts of the liberated areas for children and adults. For the first time in Oromo history various books have been produced in Oromiffa to provide education for the Oromo people.⁶⁴ Despite the conspiracy of the Ethiopian colonialists and their international supporters, "the foundation for the future Oromo society is being laid in the soil of Oromia. The land reform, which the OLF was implementing, the setting up of democratic people's organizations with power over their own lives, are dismantling and replacing the colonial, political, economic and social structures."⁶⁵ In its struggle, the OLF mainly used political and guerilla tactics, except in early 1990, when it captured the town of Asosa for a brief period.

The OLF and the New Ethiopian Crisis

Although the OLF has its army and liberated areas, it did not fully achieve a military victory like the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tragaray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Because of this, the Oromos could not yet decide their political destination as a nation. However, since the OLF has militarily and politically contributed its share to the demise of the Mengistu regime, and since it also agreed to seek a peaceful political solution for the Oromo question, it is a junior partner in forming a transitional government in Ethiopia.⁶⁶ The OLF has achieved some political and diplomatic successes from this crisis. It has gained an international recognition for the cause of the Oromo people.⁶⁷ Opposing the occupation of some Oromo territories by the TPLF and its affiliated organization, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), encouraged by the disintegration of the Ethiopian army and the liberation of Eritrea and Tigray, the Oromo people have increased their commitment to self-determination.⁶⁸ This situation might lead to the maturation of Oromo nationalism that is essential to liberate Oromia from Ethiopian colonialism.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain in detail why both the EPLF and the TPLF have been more successful militarily than the OLF. But the close alliance between the EPLF and TPLF for a political convenience has made the latter at least temporarily a dominant political force in Ethiopia. The emergence of the TPLF, with the help of the EPLF, as a dominant political force in Ethiopia indicates that the contradiction between the Oromos and the Ethiopians is going to continue in a different form. The TPLF/EPRDF did not withdraw from the Oromo territories it occupied during the disintegration of Colonel Mengistu's regime. The Oromos have seen this as "an invasion to suppress Oromo nationalism and clear the field for Tigre supremacy."⁶⁹

Despite the fact that the OLF participates in the transitional government as a junior partner, the TPLF/EPRDF tries to perpetuate Ethiopian colonialism by using the colonial policy of divide and rule. The TPLF/EPRDF, like its predecessor, the military regime, opposes the unity and organization of the Oromo people.⁷⁰ Against the interest of the Oromo people, the TPLF created the so-called Oromo People's

Democratic Organization (OPDO) by recruiting its members from Oromo war prisoners and Oromo-speaking Amharas.⁷¹

The TPLF political strategy is to develop an alternative political organization to the OLF and rule the Oromo people. Similarly, many colonial governments created and used opposition political forces against popular and legitimate movements in Africa and other places. For example, in Rhodesia, Ian Smith financed enemies of Zimbabwean liberation fronts. South Africa supported, with intelligence and finance, rivals of SWAPO in Namibia. It has also supported the Inkatha, a Zulu-based political organization against the African National Congress. The only difference between these white colonial forces and the TPLF/EPRDF is that the latter is poor and depends on foreign aid to feed its army and people. The TPLF/EPRDF via its puppet organization, the OPDO, aims to control Oromo resources and reduce Oromo political influence.⁷² Oromo elders and leaders have demanded that the OPDO, if it wants to work for the Oromo people, should join the independent Oromo national movement.⁷³

Considering what has happened in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Mengistu regime and the condition of post-cold war international politics, there is a possibility for solving the Oromo question peacefully. This means the end of Ethiopian dominance. The Ethiopians will not accept this unless they are forced to do so. They are used to playing zero-sum politics and they do not know how to compromise. The TPLF/EPRDF tries political arm-twisting and manipulation in the name of "democracy," since "Ethiopian Socialism" completely failed. It has already started to fight against the Oromo "intifadas" in Hararghe, Bale, Arssi, Ilubabor and Wallaga.⁷⁴ The TPLF might temporarily suppress Oromo nationalism with the help of outside financial and military support. The Ethiopian State cannot survive without continuous assistance from a superpower. The Oromo people predict serious danger under the TPLF/EPRDF military rule and are calling upon the OLF to prepare them for defending themselves. It is evident that the OLF has established itself as the national leader of the Oromo nation without winning a military victory. It must accomplish complex organizational and diplomatic tasks to translate its political success into a military one.

Notes

1. For example, see Paul Baxter, "The Problem of the Oromo," I.M. Lewis ed., *Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), p. 146.
2. For details, see Asafa Jalata, "The Question of Oromia: Euro-Ethiopian Colonialism, Global Hegemonism and Nationalism, 1870s-1980s," (Ph.D. dissertation: State University of New York, Binghamton, 1990), pp. 76-163.
3. For details, see Asafa Jalata, *ibid.*, pp. 324-328.
4. For details, see Jalata, *ibid.*, pp. 164-220.
5. For example, see "Ethiopia: Reds Take Charge," *Time* (June 10, 1991), pp. 26-28.
6. Baxter, "The Problem of the Oromo," p. 139.
7. Interview with Lube Biru on August 5, 1988, Riverdale, Maryland; and he was earlier interviewed (1980) by Bonnie Holcomb, who allowed me to use her notes; interview with Addisu Tolsa August 5, 1988, Riverdale, Maryland. See also, Gadaa Melbaa, 2nd ed. (Khartoum, 1988), pp. 129-132.
8. "Ye Macha Na Ye Tuullama Meredaga Demba," Metcha Tuullama Association's program, Tir 16, 1955, Ethiopian Calendar.
9. M. Hassen, "The Oromo Nation Under Ambara Colonial Administration," School of Oriental and African Studies (June 1981), p. 36.
10. M. Hassen, *ibid.*
11. Interview with Lube Biru, *ibid.*
12. Interview with Lube Biru, *ibid.*; and interview with Addisu Tolosa, *ibid.*
13. Interview with Lube Biru, *ibid.*
14. "The Oromos: Voice Against Tyranny," (Finfine, May 1971), p. 23.
15. General Taddasa's release in 1974 was widely known among the Oromos; and his murder in 1975 was announced on Ethiopian radio. The government radio said that he was killed because he was an opponent of the "Ethiopian Revolution."
16. A.P. Wood, "Rural Development and National Integration in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 26 (1983), p. 516.
17. Cited in Hassen, *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
18. Interview with Shaid Ahmed on April 21, 1988, in MPLS, conducted for me by Hailu Kenno.
19. Hassen, *ibid.*, p. 35.
20. For example, see Abera Ketsela, *The Rebellion in Bale (1963-1970)* (B.A. Thesis, Haile Selassie I University, 1971), p. 14.
21. For example, see G. Tareke, "Rural Protest in Ethiopia, 1941-1970: A Study of Three Rebellions," (Ph.D. dissertation, 1977) p. 481.
22. Abera Ketsela, *ibid.*, pp. 1-7; G. Tareke, *ibid.*, p. 310.
23. Quoted in Tareke, *ibid.*, p. 303.

24. Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), pp. 214-215.
25. Tareke, *ibid.*, p. 306.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
27. Tareke, *ibid.*, pp. 227-351.
28. Ketsela, *ibid.*, p. 22.
29. Tareke, *ibid.*, p. 312.
30. Cited in Tareke, *ibid.*, p. 326.
31. Ketsela, *ibid.*, p. 19.
32. Tareke, *ibid.*, pp. 314-315.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332; Gilkes, *ibid.*, pp. 217-218.
34. Gilkes, *ibid.*
35. "The Many Faces of the Oromo 'Assimilado'—A Transitional Trauma," in *Sagale Waldhaansso: Periodical of the Union of Oromos in North America*, vol. 11, No. 1 (1988), p. 2.
36. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin and White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 18.
37. Interview with Ali Bira on December 19, 1987 in Los Angeles, conducted for me by Mangasha Abdissa; interview with Ahemed Sheka, January 9, 1988, MPLS, conducted for me by Hailu Kenno.
38. Lube Biru, *ibid.*
39. Ali Bira, *ibid.*
40. Ali Bira, *ibid.*
41. Personal communication with Mohammed H. Adam on November 11, 1988 at Binghamton, New York. The author also personally observed this development.
42. Quoted in Hassen, *ibid.*, p. 10.
43. Adam, *ibid.*
44. The author was there and saw what happened.
45. Interviews with Ahmed M. Ali on May 22, 1988 in Toronto.
46. Addisu Tolosa, *ibid.*
47. For details, see the Oromo Liberation Front Program (Finfine: 1976).
48. *Ibid.*
49. Interview with Taddasa Eba, an OLF leader, on August 13, 1988 at Riverdale, Maryland.
50. *Ibid.*
51. For details, see Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia* (Finfine: Oromia, 1980), pp. 69-70; see also "Ethiopia II: ABO and Oromo Movements," *Africa Confidential*, vol. 19, No. 11 (May 26, 1978), pp. 5-6.
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. See, "Ethiopia: The Factional Labyrinth," in *Africa Confidential* (September 1985), p. 10.
55. Interviews with two individuals who did not want to be identified.
56. Gadaa Melbaa, *ibid.*, p. 72.

57. Baxter, *ibid.*, p. 146.
58. Interviews with Abdurashid Abduraham and Abdulhamid Ahmed on May 21, 1988 in Toronto.
59. Taha Abdo, "When is Colony a Colony?," *African Events* (September 1985), p. 10.
60. Personal discussions with Taddasa Eba, Tsegaye Yaii, Teferi Fufa, Taddasa Aga, who have some experience on the liberated areas. See also "Ethiopia fights a war of confusion," in *Jane's Defence Weekly*, vol. 7, No. 16 (25 April 1987), pp. 762-764; Teferi Fufa, "Hawiso Waraana Bilisumma Oromoo," (The Oromo Liberation Army), Video Cassette (1987); Ayana Neftalem, "The Forgotten Oromo Refugees," Video Cassette (1988), "Just How Fast is the Dergue Losing?," *Waldhaansso: Journal of the Union of Oromo in North America*, vol. 11, No. 1 (April 1987), pp. 21-27.
61. *Jane's Defence Weekly*, *ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*, p. 763.
63. Cited *ibid.*
64. Tokkumma Oromoo, "An Eye Witness Report on the Revolutionary Situation in the Liberated Areas of Western Oromia," *Waldhaansso: Journal of the Union of Oromo in North America*, vol. 11 (2 April 1987), pp. 37-38.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
66. See, for example, "Rebels Take Addis Ababa After Sporadic Fighting," *The Washington Post* (May 29, 1991), p. A24; "Ethiopia's President Cedes Capital: Government is Split Over Surrender," *The New York Times* (May 28, 1991).
67. Many newspapers and governments around the world have begun to learn about the Oromo people and the OLF. Particularly those who have interest in Ethiopia have found out there will not be peace in that country without resolving the question of the Oromo, because of its centrality in the Ethiopian problem.
68. See, for example, *Sagalee Oromo: Journal of the Union of Oromo Students in Europe*, vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991); *Waldhaansso: Journal of the Union of Oromo in North America*, vol. 11, No. 1 (August 1991), vol. 16, No. 2; *The Oromo Commentary: Bulletin of Critical Analysis of Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa*, No. 1 (January-April 1991); Robert M. Press, "In New Ethiopia, Main Tribe Takes Peaceful Route to Reclaim Rights," *The Christian Science Monitor* (July 15, 1991).
69. Mekuria Bulcha, "Problems of Democratic Transition in Post Dergue Ethiopia," *The Oromo Commentary*, no. 1 (January-April 1991), p. 6.
70. See, for example, East Africa, FBIS-AFR-91-155, "Government Objection to Oromo Organizations Scored," quoting voice of Oromo Liberation in Oromo, pp. 7-8; Press, *ibid.*
71. See, for example, *Waldhaansso*, *ibid.*, pp. 19-25.
72. See, for example, Bulcha, "'Invasion' or 'Liberation'? Conflicting Views on the TPLF/EPDRF March into Oromoland," *The Oromo Commentary*, *ibid.*, pp. 27-30.

73. See, for example, a document produced on July 17, 1991 in Finfine, by five Oromo Organization; Press, *ibid*.
74. See, for example, ORA West-Germany Ganderkesee 003 S02, 08-28-91.